

CHAPTER III - DISCOVERY

FINDING ONESELF

I must open a parenthesis here which needs clarification. As you might imagine, no philosophical thoughts expressed in this book are of my own creation; I am just a scribe, if you will. As a good student I have accumulated some of the information I deemed appropriate and applied it to my story. I didn't invent the laws governing the universe nor do I consider myself a scientist or a theologian, either.

What you are reading in these pages is a presentation of the same laws you have at your disposal, the same way they do or don't work for me. What I have done is to put them into context and aligned them with events in my life that might resonate with you as well.

Some may think that, because I have traveled the world and lived among the glamour of Las Vegas as a performer for 23 years, I must have a special quality or something. I guess one could say that, if one views the arts as a special vocation few people have the courage to follow. But I don't hold any form of influence and my name is not a household name by any stretch of the imagination. My life is very simple, somewhat of a conundrum, when I think about it.

I am, however, just like you, a unique person endowed by the Creator with a uniqueness that is unmatched by anyone in the world. My fingerprint has no twin among the 6.5 billion people roaming the earth. That thought alone should make an impression on anyone.

I was given my talents and I used them to the best of my capabilities. Unfortunately, I have also squandered many. The good news is that now I realize that there is still much more I need to do with them and much still to learn.

So now, when it comes to "perceived" success, what is it that makes someone succeed beyond their wildest dreams and some of us never seem to go anywhere in life? That is a question I have asked myself many times at different times in my life.

I have looked at what influenced me to do certain things, and what those actions created, and I came out pretty much agreeing with all the philosophers and gurus I listened to: the way I thought and the way I applied certain actions to those thoughts and beliefs created the impulses that motivated me to move in a certain direction; and that created my reality, my life; some bad, some good.

Finding oneself has to be the most excruciating of all tasks. I went through it for years, vacillating, uncertain about my capabilities, not knowing what to do. I am sure you remember some of the times when family and friends would ask you "What are you going to do when you grow up?"

"A singer, a pilot, and a cardinal" - I would respond without hesitation. It would usually elicit a lot of laughter.

"Oh, he's a dreamer" - my mother would say in a benign way. And I dreamed some more.

THE FIRST BIG TEST

I don't know about you, but I stopped my schooling at grade twelve. For one reason or another I was not inculcated with the values of higher education. Maybe it's because we didn't have the money for it. College, in my days, was for rich kids. I wasn't one of them. Plus, having had societal challenges growing up due to having been born illegitimate in a country ruled by the Catholic Church, the only thing I wanted to do was to get out of Italy; the sooner the better. I wanted to go on my own adventure and leave all the naysayers behind in my dust.

I guess all the turmoil and belligerence of growing up in a convent – out of sight, out of mind – placed a stamp of rebelliousness in my character and I began thinking of ways to get out of bondage. I would spend many nights looking at the perimeter wall of the convent thinking about scaling it and finding my way home. Of course I never attempted it. Wall-climbing with my bare hands and knees – I was always wearing short pants – was pretty much impossible. But the mind registered it, I guess, and fed the character which took me to find the courage to “get out” of Italy against all odds.

I knew that I had to be trained in something to begin my journey toward something better, and going abroad to learn several languages seemed the perfect solution to my needs. The final direction, I thought, would show itself and I would steer my ship accordingly. I was 15 when I put my plan into action. I was beginning to imagine, believe and create.

Mind you, I didn't know what I was doing. I was rebellious and I had been working every summer as a busboy helping with the family's budget. That year I flunked Latin. It had nothing to do with me working. I just hated Latin. Maybe it was an aversion to all the Latin I had to memorize as an altar boy. I don't know. What I knew, however, was that I would have to repeat the year, as I had failed the September exams as well.

The Italian school system has always been very regimented. If you failed any one subject out of the 16-18 you had to learn, you simply repeated the year. There was no way out of there. That was a huge deterrent because, by having to repeat the year, one would be the “older” student in class: *l'asino* – the stupid donkey.

“That's it. I quit! I've had it up to here with schooling.” – I shouted. We Italians shout a lot, even when we just talk. Although perceived by other cultures as shouting, it's just the way we communicate.

My father was not of the same opinion and in his usual calm demeanor just said:

“If you don't want to go back to school then you'll have to go to work. I am not supporting a lazy son.” I could hear a determination in his voice never heard before.

“Fine!” – I said. There was defiance in my voice.

That I didn't get my butt kicked was a great attribute to my father's sense of propriety. He never had to lay a hand on me; his words were enough to make me tremble. This time my gut told me I had pushed too far.

The next day I was being placed under the guidance of the supervisor at the lumber yard that my father owned at the time. I was placed at the dock, unloading lumber... by hand! Try to do that to a kid today!

That job lasted three days. I was just too weak to handle it. I had no stamina. I'd have to grow more muscles and I wasn't prepared to do that, yet. I thought I could sneak my way out of the job. Silly me.

On the third day, on my way home on my bike, I had to take refuge into a building as the sky turned green within minutes. The only tornado that ever hit Turin, to this day, hit that day! It was to be an omen. A tornado of events would soon hit me and change me forever.

Lesson learned: None.
Score: father one, son nil.

Thinking I had scored a victory was a short-lived illusion! By the following week my father had found me another job.

It was at a coffee bar opposite the central station and I had to clock in at 5:45 AM every day except Sunday. The problem was that the first public bus heading from my neighborhood to the station started its first run out of the terminal at 5:30. That meant arriving at my job half an hour late. That was unacceptable. I had to pedal my bike. And it was not even a boy's bike. It was a girl's! Insult upon insult.

Lesson learned: None.
Score: Father two, son nil.

So it went like this through the whole autumn and winter, through rain and snow, wind and fog and freezing temperatures, all the way into spring. From 4:30 in the morning, when I had to get up, till 8:30 at night when I would finally get back home. Six miles in, six miles out; and through the whole day I would only receive one meager meal and two lattes and some bread.

Hard work: cleaning the floors every hour, washing dishes and cups around the clock, dusting, cleaning windows and tables and chairs. The work one has to do to break the will of the stallion; back-breaking work. Apparently my father had left clear instructions: there was to be no pity for the boy.

Try to do that to a youngster today and you'll be put in jail! How we have changed as a society. Yes. We've grown our kids to be pussycats; sheltered, pampered, without backbone, no military service, and we wonder why we are in such a mess! Don't get me started on this.

"You are going to kill that son." I would hear my mother cry to my father in desperation.

He was immovable and so was I.

It all ended by the middle of March. One Sunday morning I begged my father to find me a school. I had seen myself growing up as a laborer and it scared the hell out of me. I was broken and I was ready to go back to school and get rid of that stupid, sissy bike!

Lesson learned: One. "Go back to school, you fool!"

Score: father three, son one.

It was too late in the year and no school would accept me. I couldn't see myself having to go through the scorn and humiliation my classmates would inflict on me for being the "older" student. It meant being stupid or retarded. You know, kids can be really cruel!

However, the School for Culinary Arts would allow me to sit in class, but I would not be graded. They would, however, allow me to apply for finals in June. And I could be tested for both years if I wanted to.

I had only one choice. I needed to pass two final exams, all in less than three months. I had to cross my Rubicon!

I burned the midnight hour 7 days a week. I only know one thing: I was focused on passing with at least a grade of 7 out of 10 - and pass both finals. If ever there was a time where failing was not an option; that was it.

TO BE CONTINUED